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The Ambiguous Nature of Multiculturalism in Two Picture Books about 9/11

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Jo Lampert,
"The Ambiguous Nature of Multiculturalism in Two Picture Books about 9/11"
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Abstract: In her paper "The Ambiguous Nature of Multiculturalism in Two Picture Books about 9/11," Jo Lampert looks at how some of the Western discourses of multiculturalism and cultural diversity have shifted since 11 September 2001 by discussing two exemplar picture books about 9/11. Lampert begins with a general discussion of children's books as significant cultural producers of knowledge and provides brief summaries of Patel's *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children* and Carlson's *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* Lampert discusses how the imagined readers of these books are positioned problematically in order to embrace racial tolerance, global harmony, and diversity while, at the same time, accepting white US-America as the symbol of goodness in the world. Lampert suggests that these texts are representative of the ways recent political agendas are present in texts that seem, as children's books, to be separate from politics.

Jo LAMPERT

The Ambiguous Nature of Multiculturalism in Two Picture Books about 9/11

The events of 11 September 2001 are commonly heralded as having signaled an instant of momentous change. Although it is difficult to say exactly how the attacks on the World Trade Centre have directly affected the West, 9/11 is often described as "the day that shook the world" (Hawthorne and Winter xvii). Scholarly books and papers have taken seriously the claim that 9/11 introduced cultural shifts (see, e.g., Sontag; Butler), particularly with respect to race and ethnicity. It seems useful, then, to look at such literary artifacts as children's books about 9/11 to see what kind of evidence they provide for this popular belief. In this article, two picture books about 9/11 are analysed for the ways multicultural discourses common in the West in the years preceding 9/11 are now altered in these texts about 9/11. This article is, more specifically, an attempt to understand how the politics of multiculturalism have been reorganized, how the US-American subject is constructed in these books, and how children are constituted as readers of these texts. Particularly useful is an understanding of the dialogic relationship between these multicultural discourses prior to 9/11 and new versions of them after 9/11, especially with reference to racial "tolerance," global "harmony," and diversity that cultural theorists such as Gregory Jay and Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope, for example, identify as having been the key positions of the late twentieth century. Implicit in my textual analysis is an interest in how political agendas are demonstrated by these texts. For instance, whose purposes do these discourses serve and which knowledges are transmitted?

Significantly, children's picture books were amongst the first texts published about 9/11, perhaps because of the speed at which they could be written (with so little text) and the eagerness of the publishing and educational communities to address 9/11 quickly. To date, more than fifty books have been written for children about 9/11. Amongst the first to be published were the two picture books discussed in this article, Andrea Patel's 2001 *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children* and Nancy Carlson's 2002 *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* If we understand the discourses about 9/11 as competing cultural and national agendas, we may be reminded that texts such as these seemingly simple books are formative -- in constituting the good U.S. citizen -- as well as being reactive to a historical moment (on this, see, e.g., Hall and DuGay). In other words, it is through texts like these, produced in specific historic sites, that knowledges and identities are produced and re-worked and cultural meanings are re-shaped. The two books provide both overtly and implicitly a way for children to perform as good citizens in a complex and uncertain culturally pluralistic community, particularly in the U.S. where it has become increasingly important to define a national identity and to choose between an "us" and a "them." In other words, the necessity to imagine a "true" or "good" US-American is more important than ever. Texts like the said two picture books contribute to the "reproduction, dissemination, and confirmation of a renewed American identity" (Lisle 6). The examination of children's picture books for their role in cultural production is, Roderick McGillis suggests, both serious and useful, in that "everything our culture produces communicates in ways we would do well to try and understand, and everything our culture produces works upon us in some fashion that we ought to be aware of" (203). Hence these two picture books, whether or not they sold widely or remained in print for long, may reveal to us the ways some of the discourses of multiculturalism began to shift very soon after 9/11.

As I mentioned above, *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children* and *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* are two of the very first books that were written for children about 9/11. Patel's *On That Day* was, in fact, written one week after the attacks. It is a picture book for pre-schoolers that proposes to explain why "bad things" (5) happen (to good people) and what children can do to make the world safe again. Proceeds from the book are donated to 9/11 scholarship programs. The author explains her urgency in writing this book on the dust jacket: she felt immediately compelled, she

writes, to explain 9/11 to children, to allay their fears. The second book, Carlson's *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* was produced with equal haste. One line of text, which sits beneath an illustration of the U.S. flag at half-mast, states that "the book was written on September 12, 2001," the day after 9/11. These, then, are both texts quickly produced, allowing us a glimpse into some very immediate ways in which the events of 9/11 were represented to children. Consequently, these seemingly simple books provide material for analysis.

Briefly, *On That Day* is directly about the events of 9/11 and is explained to its readers in this way: the world is a big, beautiful and mostly peaceful place. One day a terrible thing happened and "the world" got hurt badly. Many people died and everyone was sad. Sometimes bad things happen for no good reason, and this is very frightening. We can make the world better by helping and sharing. "Goodness" will always win out over "badness." The understanding this book constructs of the world is illustrated by the last page of the book, with the following text: "When bad things happen, only a small piece of the world breaks, not the whole world. Goodness is in the world, and it's stronger than badness. There will always be good things in the world. You are one of those good things" (12). The second book, *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* is not directly about 11 September but declares itself to have been written because of 9/11. It also presumes that children have been left fearful by the attacks and reassures the reader that the world is not as frightening as it suddenly seemed. The book begins with the line, "there's lots to be scared of, that's for sure" (1) and ends with the positive affirmation that "there's a big, beautiful world out there just waiting for you!" (29). The first half of the book lists the kinds of things that might frighten children: a mean dog, a thunderstorm, roller coasters, stories in the news, public speaking, insects, clowns, shadows, and even "people who look different from you" (12). But the text then states that "after a while, hiding under your covers can get pretty boring" (14). Each of those previously named fears is then re-examined for its positive side. For instance, "maybe that scary dog only looks mean" (15). The happy and smiling diverse group of children in the final illustration reminds readers that there is much to look forward to. It is the representation of those who are virtuous versus that which is frightening that provides material for analyses.

Since the 1970s, identity politics in particular and the politics of difference have taken centre stage in critical cultural studies (see, e.g., Jordan and Weedon). These concerns are still present in both of the two picture books. However, within these two books a "new normal" (Hibbs 2) begins to emerge whereby certain "populist understandings of multiculturalism" (Phillips 22) which existed pre 9/11 are continued, but less comfortably, after the attacks on the Twin Towers. The books appear to herald, at least in part, a return to a type of multiculturalism that has, at times, served the needs of more imperialist agendas (see Jordan and Weedon 485). They now illustrate a desire to create a more trustworthy and unified, singular US-American identity (which is also an imaginary community following Benedict Anderson's notion). In other words, they begin to back away from some of the recent multicultural agendas that present the possibility of a culturally pluralistic community where everyone may maintain their cultural identity, and all cultures are of equal merit (a popular definition of multiculturalism offered by Pettman). In these books multiculturalism and diversity require new practices for the reader who must negotiate the cultural meaning of race relationships against a myriad of pre-existing ideas about culture and race and a barrage of texts about and since 9/11: the complex nature of multicultural agendas is not new, nor have the problems multiculturalism discourses pose since 9/11 gone unnoticed. Multiculturalism has always worked better in theory than in practice and has long been understood as problematic. Embracing cultural difference at the same time as promoting patriotic national unity is a complex objective, full of competing ideas. Anouar Majid (11) claims that the field of postcolonial studies was one of the casualties of 9/11, in which the West was no longer sure how it felt about the fantasized globalized world of multiple and hybrid identities.

In the next sections of the paper, the two picture books are analysed in how they, too, struggle with these competing ideas of multiculturalism alongside the post 9/11 desire to define a national identity of good citizenship. In making meaning of these texts, a complicated competition emerges

between the urge to represent an idealized culturally diverse world and a white American desire for centrality and dominance within that world. For example, on the one hand *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* contains numerous illustrations of people of many colours holding hands. *On That Day* illustrates global relationships in a similar way -- the globe represented as one big world where we all live happily together in peace. And yet in both texts, the post-modern, flexible identities which were heralded prior to 9/11 (see, e.g., Kahn) seem reduced back to a single identity; that of the good US-American citizen, virtuous and benevolent. This is especially true in *On That Day* where, on the last page, the white child's face takes up its rightful position in the centre of the globe. In both books, the central character is almost certainly white, and although in each the protagonist makes friends with the "Other" (as signified mostly by people of colour), readers are positioned to identify most strongly with the white US-American. It is this white central character in each book that comes to seem "normal," and is equated with goodness, morality, and courage. This can be illustrated further by reading two images from *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!*:

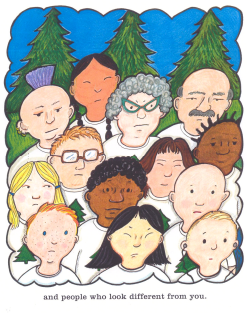

Figure 1 (Carlson 12)

Figure 2 (Carlson 19)

In suggesting that there is something natural about the fear we might have about other "people who look different" from us, the reader is compelled to look upon a group image of these potentially frightening others. In the linguistic choice of the word "you" the reader is also clearly identified as being unlike the sullen, menacing (or at least sad) faces in this illustration. This is, indeed, a mildly threatening group, with a particular blond girl looking suspiciously to her left, towards a black boy at the centre. This can be contrasted with the other more positive images that follow this page; the nicely dressed white girl beaming a positive smile, shining in her individuality in front of an audience. These illustrations appear to embody a US-American subject, centre-stage. Similarly, in Carlson's text, "we" may make friends with scary people but they are still the ones who make you want to "hide under your covers and never come out" (13). Fear of the Other is given final privilege over tolerance. It is the fear that "sticks." It does seem intentional in *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* to convince the reader that she/he is one of those "good" things. Perhaps it was not only children who needed this reassurance. It was a major concern for the U.S. as a nation to re-establish itself as the representation of goodness and truth when, in a dramatic way, it became clear that other states and cultures might not think of them as such. The conflation of the U.S. as the physical centre of the world, and the further construction of the U.S. as the moral centre of the world can also be read into the texts. *On That Day* explains that the world is "mostly good" and "pretty peaceful" (2). Its final illustration presents the reader with the blue-eyed US-American child at the literal centre of the globe, interpolating the reader into this particular dominant ideology.

On one hand, these books can be read as an innocent reassurance of children who may have felt truly fear that they were not safe after 9/11; as such the books could be seen as providing respite from perceived anxiety. And yet, of course, the world is not "pretty peaceful" for much of the world. Thomas Hibbs refers to reassuring texts such as these as an "unreflective innocence," displaying a desire to return to an age which never existed in the first place, and to which we "must and cannot

return" (23). Both books suggest that goodness is at the heart of the American identity. The textual explanations of goodness in the world are closely related to popular discourses having to do with the US-American family.

In these two books goodness is strongly linked to images of the "average" white US-American family, working intertextually alongside the many other ways family values have been promoted since 9/11. In the illustrations from *On That Day*, which show a happy nuclear family consisting of what looks like a father, a mother, and two children, we are presented with a clichéd US-American family. This is the "fantasy landscape of whiteness" as defined by Amitov Kumar which appears to be visible since 9/11 (274). There is, of course, a precedent for the re-emergence of the strengthened bond between family and national unity in times of trouble. Stuart Hall and Paul DuGuy have historicized the political use to which this idealized nuclear family has been put, for instance in Britain during the Thatcher era when it was evoked to counter a sense of fragility in the economy. It is not uncommon to use "family values" and to imagine the nation as represented by a family to restore peoples' confidence in times of uncertainty. Edward Said was only one of a number of critics who saw a rise in national fervor after 9/11 and accusing George W. Bush of having consciously drawn "God and America into alignment against Islam" (Said qtd. in Bawer 626). In the two picture books, this occurs in many ways. The US-American child has agency in *On That Day* only if she/he helps others/shares/is kind and performs particular sorts of virtuous acts. In other words, the child must negotiate that complicated act of behaving both as a tolerant individual and as part of a greater family. Illustrations in both books, showing nuclear families holding hands simultaneously reinforce both "traditional" family values and the values of the national family.

Judith Butler suggests that US-Americans, having been attacked for the first time at home, lost their First World complacency after 9/11. As a consequence, it became even more imperative that divisions between Good and Evil be made clear. This can bee found in narrative decisions made in these two books through their use of pronouns. Who are "we" now in uncertain times? Who are "you"? If it is so that 9/11 pushed the U.S. to ask, "who is with us? Who is against us?" (Butler 7), narrative points-of-view become important linguistic signifiers in texts such as these. Prior to 9/11 it might be argued that US-Americans felt reasonably comfortable, at least in the middle-class popular imagination, with the multicultural "we." There was a public (if not private) sense that the U.S. was a functioning multicultural nation: a "melting pot." In both *On That Day* and *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* the books begin by addressing the reader as "you" speaking directly to the implied (white) reader and thus attempting to position him/her as the preferred audience for the healing narrative. However, the use of pronouns shifts throughout the text of *On That Day* in significant ways. No matter whether, from page to page, the point of view is first, second, or third-person, since the central faces in the illustrations are white, the implied reader may also be presumed to be white. For example, in *On That Day* an illustration of a white girl is central on the page where the text reads, "you can help by sharing" (8) and again on the page which claims that there are bad things in the world and good things, and "you are one of those good things" (12). In actuality, the text of this book is in third person until page six, when the reader is asked the question, "is there anything we can do to make the world right again?" This "we" as a reading position is a useful way now to generate a collective identity necessary to clarify an "us against them" binary. Yet, as Susan Sontag noted in her discussion of representation post 9/11, "no 'we' should be taken for granted" (7). The pronoun changes two pages later, shifting the reader's position from the plural "we" to the singular "you." This page reads, "you can help by sharing" (8). Most crucially, several pages later the text reads, "there will always be good things in the world. You are one of those good things" (12). Thus two things are established in the text: the reader is part of a greater, collective (US-American) cause ("we"), and maintains individual responsibility to uphold US-American goodness ("you"). The separation of "us" from "them" is implicit (there are indeed very bad things in the world, but you are not one of them).

It is relevant here to recall Said's prediction, soon after 9/11, about renewed binaries in Western thought: "We have all succumbed to the promiscuous misuse of language and sense, by which everything we don't like has become terror and what we do is pure and good" (Said <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/577/op2.htm>). Similarly, in *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* it is the female, white child who is protected from those she looks different from. It is this white child who has a big, beautiful world out there, "just waiting" for her (29). In this book, illustrations could come directly from a 1950s reader with its use of bright colours and its nuclear family in a tidy kitchen behind a white picket fence. If the 1950s is evoked, it is a reminder of a more innocent past. The protagonist of the book (the "you") is a white girl of about ten and all the images of people in authority in the book are likewise white: her parents, the staff at the depicted summer camp, the newsreader on TV, the faces in the newspaper her parents are reading. When such texts construct community, it is clear who belong to it. There are people of colour in this world, and it is good to befriend them, but they stand to the side, at the margins. The "you" who is addressed by the text and illustrations is made clear.

On That Day and *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* are both concerned with ways to live in the world post 9/11. These 9/11 books invent the world in particular ways and in doing so privilege particular ideologies. How the world is defined in the texts are related to race and culture in ways that once again are problematic when read against familiar discourses of multiculturalism. Prior to 9/11, although the term multiculturalism was contested, popular rhetoric about multiculturalism and inclusion celebrated difference and lauded diversity. In *On That Day* in particular, the world is reduced to one US-America, with one value to uphold, one reading of right and wrong, and, in a return to modernism, a "true" definition of goodness and badness. In this sense, this book is a re-colonisation rather than a de-colonisation in the sense of Franz Fanon's notion. For instance, the repeated image of the globe in the illustrations suggests concern for the whole world. However, under one illustration of the globe, the text says that when "the world got hurt, everyone was sad" (3). This use of the word "everyone" firmly places the text within an ethnocentric tradition, where the U.S. stands for everywhere and US-Americans for everyone. In the images of people in *On That Day* we also see a morphing of diverse cultures into a more homogeneous US-American body. There is little appreciation of difference in *On That Day.* The illustrations mostly show faceless children or children with their backs to the reader:

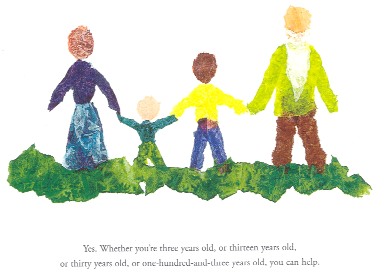

Figure 3 (Patel 7)

Although their race is somewhat ambiguous (it could be argued that they are not necessarily white), it may be significant that they are faceless. This is no celebration of difference but an uncertain depiction of a homogeneous group, working together as one, with a nod to multiculturalism thrown in. By the end of the book the "face," which, according to Emmanuel Levinas is the "very cultural means through which the paradigmatically human is established" is blonde and blue-eyed, a representation which, taken up the last frame on the last page, takes priority as the face of good citizenship (Levinas qtd. in Butler 143). This white face may be read intertextually against the other 9/11

sources. By the time readers encountered these books after 9/11, they already knew the ethnicity of the "face" they should fear. People of "Middle Eastern Appearance" had already been vilified (see, e.g., Marrouchi). This racial targeting/profiling cannot help but be part of the reader's dialogue with these texts. Nonetheless, the texts struggle with this, trying their best to maintain a "tolerant" and benevolent perspective. Indeed, *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* attempts to address the racial targeting that was inevitable after 9/11 and to explain it to children in a way that both satisfies the liberal-minded multiculturalist who wants children to make friends with those who are "different," and also to address the ways they might now scare them. This is a hugely difficult task: to acknowledge fears about race while embracing racial difference. So, despite the conclusion of *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!*, where the readers are told to make friends with all those scary people who are different from them, it is significant that there is not one "normal" white face in that frightening mob. Instead, these potentially fear-inducing faces include several black children, old people, various people with disabilities (deafness, blindness, and a bald child presumably undergoing chemotherapy), and some Asian children, all quite stereotypically drawn. Additionally, although by the end the reader is told not to fear these people, the inclusion of them in the first place as naturally fear-provoking is privileged and likely to be remembered.

However, the books must pretend not to be referring to ethnicity at all. *On That Day* renders the Other largely invisible. Although the reader is told that "sometimes bad things happen because people act in mean ways and hurt each other on purpose" (5), these bad people are unnamed. In their invisibility, a Middle Eastern presence in fact becomes more visible as adult readers of this book, at any rate, already knew/know the ethnicity of these "bad people." Additionally, these bad people behave in ways, the book suggests, that are inexplicable and irrational which is, as Fanon suggests, traditionally the way the Other has been represented. In the explanation in *On That Day* that "sometimes bad things happen because people act in mean ways and hurt each other on purpose" (5), the irrational act of the terrorists on 9/11 is contrasted with the counsel offered by this book to its readers who are instructed to think rationally about what they must do to heal the world. For instance, the illustrations in the book show the globe having broken into pieces, floating around in a chaotic state after 9/11. Children may read this to understand that the world can be returned to its natural order by rational and good (US-American) children, like themselves, who will help this to happen. Chaos in the world returns to order, nature is restored, and the random savageness of the world is tamed as the chaotic margins are contained. Similarly, in *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* readers are instructed to get out from under the blankets, face their fears, and return to the world of sunshine, flowers, and happy families. Both books can be understood as expressing a strong desire to return to a more innocent, simple world where goodness is visible and the world order is clear.

In an article about multiculturalism after 9/11, Haithe Anderson suggests that in the prevalent post 9/11 discourse that revives the binaries of good and evil, multiculturalism was set back in crucial ways. The now familiar division of nation and culture into good and evil is in itself, he claims, a rejection of multiculturalism. Anderson states: "The assertion that these adversaries are amoral is a gesture of intolerance, not impartiality, and what it reveals is a clash of cultures and not an embrace of multiculturalism" (Anderson <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=11009>). In addition, he attests that "one cannot embrace a doctrine of plural judgements and advocate for the celebration of cultural differences and then turn around, when the going gets tough and claim that world-wide standards of judgments are in force and should be followed" (<http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=11009>). These tensions that Anderson illustrates are present in both of the children's books. The moral dictates of *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* are that "goodness" lies in such things as taking care of your friends, taking care of nature, being kind, laughing and playing. Although these seem like universal guidelines for children, they are still part of a culturally-bound, taken-for-granted discourse, part of a pervasive humanism noted by many (e.g., Jordan and Weedon) which seems to have enjoyed a revival since 9/11, although it has

always held a strong place in children's literature. Despite the superficial attempts these books makes to be inclusive of other cultures, it can be argued that they do not affirm the uniqueness of cultures, and are morally certain about the ways goodness can be enacted. This leaves little room for the reader to interrogate or subvert the strongly stated notions of goodness (the result of particular conscious and rational ways of behaving as listed) and badness (inexplicable). Within these picture books, however, the ideologies of goodness and badness are couched within the discourse of caring and sharing. There are still very few available texts in English about 9/11 which offer an alternative meta-narrative to the good/bad binary. Goodness is constituted discursively in its rationality, and badness in its unquestioned irrationality in ways bound to race politics. If, as Said claimed, the lack of critique available after 9/11 masks the real global power struggles that were the issues behind the attacks on the World Trade Centre, then "badness" is a useful tactic to explain away a situation of much greater complexity. The enemy is constituted in simplistic forms within both picture books. This text gives us an example of namelessness and invisibility that Cornell West labels a social and psychic erasure. A Muslim child would surely find his/her place in either of these texts invisible but implicit.

As multiculturalism becomes complicated in these books about 9/11, the popular discourses of global harmony also become problematic in these two picture books. Again, despite their slender attempts to present the world as diverse and interconnected, each book is primarily concerned with constructing the unified US-American subject which claims superiority. They both glorify the social mission in the U.S. that is stated on the second page of *On That Day*, that "the world is very big, and really round, and pretty peaceful" (2). The illustration on that page shows a collaged globe in green, blue, black and white. We are told at various times in the text that, "the world ... got badly hurt" and "everyone was sad "when "the world broke" (3). This reconfiguring of the U.S. as the whole world succeeds in constituting US-America as heroic; the conflation is an example of "a single culture masquerading as the originating centre" (Ashcroft 196). This US-Americanization of the text is at odds with the discourse in the same text which romanticizes a global brotherhood, implied by many of the illustrations of the globe breaking into pieces. The globe performs as a floating signifier, which has shifted in meaning since 9/11. In *On That Day*, the globe has to stand for two competing things at once: the utopic globalised multicultural world, and the re-definition of America as the centre of that world. These are complex desires to bring together. Valentin Voloshinov/Mikhail Bakhtin (qtd. in Morris 55) noted that the inner dialectic quality of a sign (i.e., the floating meaning of the globe in this book) often comes out fully in the open only in times of social crisis. The pictorial representations, for instance, of the U.S. as the centre of the world signifies a purposeful and political intent. In *On That Day*, the tragedy of 9/11 is illustrated as having split the entire world into pieces; America's healing would piece it together again. In this way, as Homi Bhabha suggests, we remain safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity. We are all as one. Similarly, in *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* contradictory ideologies are present with respect to the globe. The book ends with an illustration of the U.S. flag flying at half-mast. Despite the fact that the text says there is a big, beautiful world out there, the flag at the end suggests that it is not, in fact, out there in the whole world, but is found on U.S. soil. One might not wish to venture, in fact, out into the rest of the world, which in this text barely exists.

In conclusion, even seemingly simple picture books such as *On That Day* and *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* highlight the complexity of cultural shifts since 9/11. Exploring the complicated ways multiculturalism and global harmony emerge in these books enables a reflection on the political agendas and the construction of new subjectivities in the West; the ways in which these texts have a stake in constituting the reader as a particular kind of subject, who engages in 'helping' the world in very specific, racialized ways. As Roderick McGillis reminds us, an examination of this sort enables us to see how children's books contribute to the social and cultural fashioning of readers (2). The two books analysed here may mark the early emergence of new versions of multiculturalism, which we might look at with great interest as new children's books about 9/11 appear.

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